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ABSTRACT

Each year nearly 400,000 children in the United States are thrust into court through no fault of their own. Often these children also become victims of the United States' overburdened child welfare system. A Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteer is a trained citizen who is appointed by a judge to represent the best interests of a child in court. Children helped by CASA volunteers include those for whom home placement is being determined in juvenile court. Most of the children are victims of abuse and neglect. This fact sheet, through a question and answer format, explains what CASA is, the role of a CASA volunteer, affiliations of CASA, and the history of CASA. A map of the United States details the locations of the 556 CASA programs located in all 50 states. (JBJ)

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A child's voice in court.

The National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association
2722 Eastlake Ave. E. Suite 220 • Seattle, Washington 98102 • 206-328-8588 • FAX 206-323-8137

CASA Fact Sheet

What is a CASA volunteer?

A Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteer is a trained citizen who is appointed by a judge to represent the best interests of a child in court. Children helped by CASA volunteers include those for whom home placement is being determined in juvenile court. Most of the children are victims of abuse and neglect.

What is the CASA volunteer's role?

A CASA volunteer provides a judge with carefully researched background of the child to help the court make a sound decision about that child's future. Each home placement case is as unique as the child involved. The CASA volunteer must determine if it is in a child's best interests to stay with his or her parents or guardians, be placed in foster care, or be freed for permanent adoption. The CASA volunteer makes a recommendation on placement to the judge, and follows through on the case until it is permanently resolved.

How does a CASA volunteer investigate a case?

To prepare a recommendation, the CASA volunteer talks with the child, parents, family members, social workers, school officials, health providers and others who are knowledgeable about the child's history. The CASA volunteer also reviews all records pertaining to the child -- school, medical and case worker reports; and other documents.

How does a CASA volunteer differ from a social service caseworker?

Social workers generally are employed by state governments. They sometimes work on as many as 60 to 90 cases at a time and are frequently unable to conduct a comprehensive investigation of each. The CASA worker is a volunteer with more time and a smaller caseload (an average of 1-2 cases at a time). The CASA volunteer does not replace a social worker on a case; he or she is an independent appointee of the court. The CASA volunteer can thoroughly examine a child's case, has knowledge of community resources, and can make a recommendation to the court independent of state agency restrictions.

How does the role of a CASA volunteer differ from an attorney?

The CASA volunteer does not provide legal representation in the courtroom. That is the role of the attorney. However, the CASA volunteer does provide crucial background information that assists attorneys in presenting their cases. It is important to remember that CASA volunteers do not represent a child's wishes in court. Rather, they speak to the child's best interests.

Is there a "typical" CASA volunteer?

CASA volunteers come from all walks of life, with a variety of professional, educational and ethnic backgrounds. There are more than 33,000 CASA volunteers nationally. Local programs vary in number of volunteers they utilize. Aside from their CASA volunteer work, 54 percent are employed in regular full-time jobs; the majority tend to be professionals. 83% of the volunteers nationwide are women; 17% are men.

How does the CASA volunteer relate to the child he or she represents?

CASA volunteers offer children trust and advocacy during complex legal proceedings. They explain to the child the events that are happening, the reasons they all are in court, and the roles the judge, lawyers, and social workers play. CASA volunteers also encourage the child to express his or her own opinion and hopes, while remaining objective observers.

How many cases on the average does a CASA volunteer carry at a time?

The number varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, but an average caseload is one to two.

Do lawyers, judges and social caseworkers support CASA?

Yes. Juvenile and family court judges implement the CASA program in their courtrooms and appoint volunteers. CASA has been endorsed by the American Bar Association, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Does the federal government support CASA?

CASA is a priority project of the Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The office encourages the

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establishment of new CASA programs, assists established CASA programs, and provides partial funding for the National CASA Association.

How many CASA programs are there?

There are now 556 CASA programs in all 50 states and Washington D.C. New programs start up at the average of two per month.

How effective have CASA programs been?

Preliminary findings show that children who have been assigned CASA volunteers tend to spend less time in court and less time within the foster care system than those who do not have CASA representation. Judges have observed that CASA children also have better chances of finding permanent homes than non-CASA children.

How much time does it require?

Each case is different. A CASA volunteer usually spends about 10 hours doing research and conducting interviews prior to the first court appearance. More complicated cases take longer. Once initiated into the system, volunteers work about 10-15 hours a month.

How long does a CASA volunteer remain involved with a case?

The volunteer continues until the case is permanently resolved. One of the primary benefits of the CASA program is that, unlike other court principals who often rotate cases, the CASA volunteer is a consistent figure in the proceedings, and provides continuity for a child.

Are there any other agencies or groups that provide the same service?

No. There are other child advocacy organizations, but CASA is the only program where volunteers are appointed by the court to represent a child's best interests.

What children are assigned CASA volunteers?

Children who are victims of abuse and neglect who have become wards of the court are assigned CASA volunteers. The program is most common in juvenile and family court cases.

What is the role of the National CASA Association?

The National CASA Association is a non-profit organization that represents and serves the local CASA programs. It provides training, technical assistance, research, media and public awareness services to members.

How is CASA funded?

At the local level, CASA programs are generally funded through a state's department of justice. Many programs are privately funded through service organizations such as the Junior League and the National Council of Jewish Women. The National CASA Association is funded through a combination of private grants, federal funds (U.S. Justice Department), memberships and contributions.

How can I find the CASA program in my community?

CASA programs are known by a variety of names, including Guardian ad Litem programs, ProKids, Child Advocates, Inc., and Voices for Children, to name a few. If you cannot find a program in your area, contact the National CASA Association for referral.

How do I get more information about becoming a CASA volunteer or joining the National CASA Association?

Contact:
National CASA Association
2722 Eastlake Ave. E.
Suite 220
Seattle, WA 98102
(206) 328-8588 or
1 (800) 628-3233

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What is CASA?

Each year nearly 400,000 children in the United States are thrust into court through no fault of their own.

Some are victims of violence, psychological torment or sexual abuse. Others have been neglected or even abandoned by their own parents. Most of them are frightened and confused.

Often these children also become victims of this country's overburdened child welfare system -- a complex legal network of lawyers, social workers and judges who frequently are too overburdened to give thorough, detailed attention to each child who comes before them.

The consequences can be severe.

A nine-year-old boy is discovered in a Kentucky foster home so malnourished he weighs only 17 pounds. A child dies in a state-licensed "temporary care" shelter, where seven children had been sharing one bedroom for more than a year. An 18-year old boy moves out of his seventh New York foster home, unable to read, write or care for himself as an adult.

Annual foster care costs
total $6 billion

These are just three of thousands of children who will never know what it is like to have a permanent home -- with their formative years "lost" in temporary care while the court decides their fate. The annual foster care bill to the taxpayers is over $6 billion, but the cost in human potential is even greater. Studies show there is a very good chance many of the children will end up juvenile delinquents or adult criminals.

Enter the CASA concept. The Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program was created in 1977 to make sure that the abuse and neglect that these children originally suffered at home doesn't continue as abuse and neglect at the hands of the system.

A CASA worker is a trained community volunteer who is appointed by a juvenile or family court judge to speak for the best interest of children who are brought before the court. The majority of a CASA volunteer's assignments are home placement cases where an abused and neglected child has been removed for protection from the care of his or her parents.

Can anyone volunteer to be a CASA?

CASA volunteers are ordinary citizens. No special or legal background is required. Volunteers are screened closely for objectivity, competence and commitment.

What training does a CASA
volunteer receive?

CASA volunteers undergo a thorough training course conducted by the local CASA program. Training requirements vary from program to program, but an average course is approximately 24 hours. Volunteers learn about courtroom procedure from the principals in the system -- from judges, lawyers, social workers, court personnel, and others. CASA volunteers also learn effective advocacy techniques for children, and are educated about specific topics ranging from seminars on child sexual abuse to discussions on early childhood development and adolescent behavior.

Volunteer has three roles

As a child advocate, the CASA volunteer has three main responsibilities:

1) to serve as a fact-finder for the judge by thoroughly researching the background of each assigned case;

2) to speak for the child in the courtroom, representing the child's best interests; and

3) to continue to act as a "watchdog" for the child during the life of the case, ensuring that it is brought to a swift and appropriate conclusion.

CASA based on child's rights

The CASA concept is based on the commitment that every child has the right to a safe, permanent home. In court jurisdictions that have adopted the program, the juvenile or family court judge turns to a specially trained pool of CASA volunteers each time a case involving a child is received.

The judge appoints a volunteer to the child's case. The volunteer then becomes an official part of the judicial proceedings, working alongside attorneys and social workers as an appointed officer of the court. Unlike attorneys and social workers, however, the CASA volunteer speaks exclusively for the child's best interests.

By handling only one or two cases at a time (compared to a social agency caseworker's average load of 60-90), the CASA volunteer has the time to explore thoroughly the history of each assigned

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case. The volunteer talks with the child, parents and family members, neighbors, school officials, doctors and others involved in the child's background who might have facts about the case. The volunteer then reviews all records and documents pertaining to the child. He or she then submits a formal report to the court recommending placement: should the child stay with his or her parents, be placed in foster care, or be freed for permanent adoption?

If the court leaves the child in temporary care, the CASA volunteer provides continuity by staying on the case until it is permanently resolved.

CASA helps children nationwide

Since its creation in 1977, CASA has had a dramatic impact on the nation's court system. There are now 556 CASA programs in all 50 states and in Washington, D.C. New programs start up at a rate of four per month. Research shows these programs utilize more than 33,000 volunteers, who help an estimated 25 percent of the nation's abused and neglected children in dependency proceedings. In 1993, they worked with approximately 116,000 children. Local CASA programs vary in size and scope from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

Programs often differ from one jurisdiction to another, with varying operating methods and sources of funding. In all states the CASA volunteer is a monitor, providing research and background, and following through on each case to see that the court's recommendations are carried out. In some states, the CASA volunteer is a full party to court proceedings to the extent that he or she may call witnesses and solicit testimony through the services of an attorney.

CASA is known at the local level by a variety of other names. In San Diego, CA the Program is called Voices for Children; in Cincinnati, OH, it's ProKids. One of the Largest CASA programs in the nation is the Florida Guardian Ad Litem program, managed by state government.

Voices in Support of CASA

"As Chairman of the National Commission on Children, I have observed judges in juvenile courts with a mere 10 to 15 minutes to decide whether a child should remain in a distressed family or placed in foster care. With growing caseloads, it's increasingly difficult for the courts and social workers to make the system work for families and children. This is why CASA volunteers are so essential. They provide valuable information and insight about individual children. CASA deserves our deep admiration and support."

--- U.S. Senator John D. Rockefeller, IV
Chairman, The National Commission on Children

"Citizen volunteers have historically been the basic underpinning of child and youth services. CASA volunteers epitomize the value of volunteerism in building and maintaining a national network of effective youth services. Funds are not available to provide the quality of services provided by CASA's cadre of trained volunteers to the thousands of youth served nation-wide during the course of a year. We all benefit from their dedicated service."

---John J. Wilson,
Acting Administrator
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention,
U.S. Department of Justice,
Washington, D.C.

"We cannot underestimate the role of CASA programs in our communities. The growing recognition of the role of CASA as an integral part of the constituency for children, not only in the Courts, but in the community which allocates resources and services, should be celebrated. Both the voices of children and the voices of the volunteers, staff and program directors of CASA in their own right have led to CASA becoming a key player in the network of champions overcoming internal resistance to system change in the courts, the agencies and in the community."

---Richard FitzGerald, Judge
Jefferson Family Court, Louisville, KY
Chair, Permanency Planning
Project for Children, 1993 - 1994
National Council of Juvenile
and Family Court Judges

The National CASA Association, based in Seattle, WA, was established in 1982 to provide a national focus for individual CASA programs, promote the CASA concept, provide technical assistance to new programs, and support with volunteer recruitment, fundraising and public awareness outreach.

For additional information contact:

National CASA Association
2722 Eastlake Avenue East, Suite 220
Seattle, Washington 98102
1.800.628.3233

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History of CASA

In 1976, Superior Court Judge David Soukup of Seattle, WA, saw a recurring problem in his courtroom:

"In criminal and civil cases, even though there were always many different points of view, you walked out of the courthouse at the end of the day and you said, 'I've done my best; I can live with this decision,' he explains.

"But when you're involved with a child and you're trying to decide what to do to facilitate that child's growth into a mature and happy adult, you don't feel like you have sufficient information to allow you to make the right decision. You can't walk away and leave them at the courthouse at 4 o'clock. You wonder, 'Do I really know everything I should? Have I really been told all of the different things? Is this really right?'"

To ensure he was getting all the facts and the long-term welfare of each child was being represented, the Seattle judge came up with an idea that would change America's judicial procedure and the lives of thousands of children. He obtained funding to recruit and train community volunteers to step into courtrooms on behalf of the children: the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteers.

This unique concept was implemented in Seattle as a pilot program in January 1977. During that first year, the program provided 110 trained CASA volunteers for 498 children in 376 dependency cases.

In 1978 the National Center of State Courts selected the Seattle program as the "best national example of citizen participation in the juvenile justice system." This recognition, along with a grant from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation of New York City (one of CASA's earliest and strongest supporters), resulted in the replication of the Seattle CASA program in courts across the country.

As CASA projects developed, each new local program director made an on-site visit to the original Seattle host program for observation and training.

By 1982 it was clear that a national association was needed to direct CASA's emerging national presence. The National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association was formed that year.

By 1984 the National CASA Association had received financial support from several significant sources: a grant from the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, under the direction of the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; and two one-year grants from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation.

National CASA has also received support from the Kappa Alpha Theta Foundation. This international women's fraternity selected CASA as its philanthropy and has provided funds for a variety of projects, including start-up grants and a public awareness video.
The Association opened its national headquarters office in Seattle, Washington, in the summer of 1984, and launched a membership and fundraising drive.

On April 22, 1985, President Ronald Reagan presented the National CASA Association with the President's Volunteer Action Award for "outstanding volunteer contribution, demonstrating accomplishment through voluntary action."

In August of 1989, the American Bar Association, the country's largest professional organization of attorneys, officially endorsed the use of CASA volunteers to work with attorneys to speak for abused and neglected children in court.

In July of 1990, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges named CASA "Outstanding Volunteer Program" in America's juvenile and family courts.

Also during that year the U.S. Congress authorized the expansion of CASA with the passage of the "Victims of Child Abuse Act of 1990" (P.L. 101-647), so that "court-appointed special advocate shall be available to every victim of child abuse or neglect in the United States that needs such an advocate."

The U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect included utilization of CASAs and volunteer GALs among critical first steps it recommends to bring the "national emergency" of child abuse and neglect in America today under control.

In July of 1991, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, named CASA an "Exemplary National Program in Juvenile Delinquency Prevention."
In December of 1992, David Soukup, founder of CASA, was recognized with an award from the Caring Institute of Washington, D.C.

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Also in 1992, Congress initiated funding of a grants program to expand CASA representation of abused and neglected children.

Today the National CASA Association represents 550 CASA programs in all 50 states and in Washington, D.C. It provides support for starting programs, technical assistance, training, and fundraising, media, and public awareness services.

VOICES IN TRIBUTE

The judges speak:

"Abused and neglected children need someone to speak up for them. No one does this more effectively and with more dedication than the CASA volunteer. As a judge, I rely heavily on the CASA's insight and recommendation to the court. CASA does work."

-- Judge Salvadore T. Mulé, Past President
National Council of Juvenile & Family Court Judges

"We find that the benefits of CASA are just fantastic. We have found we have reunited more families, freed children for adoption, and tried to stop this constant turntable of moving children from foster home to foster home and on and on."

-- Judge John Mendoza, Las Vegas, Nevada

"Because of the professional approach the volunteers have taken, they have been able to dispel any initial suspicions. Their comments are welcome, especially by agency workers who have realized they're not out to show them up, but be of assistance to them in an area they have not had time to cover."

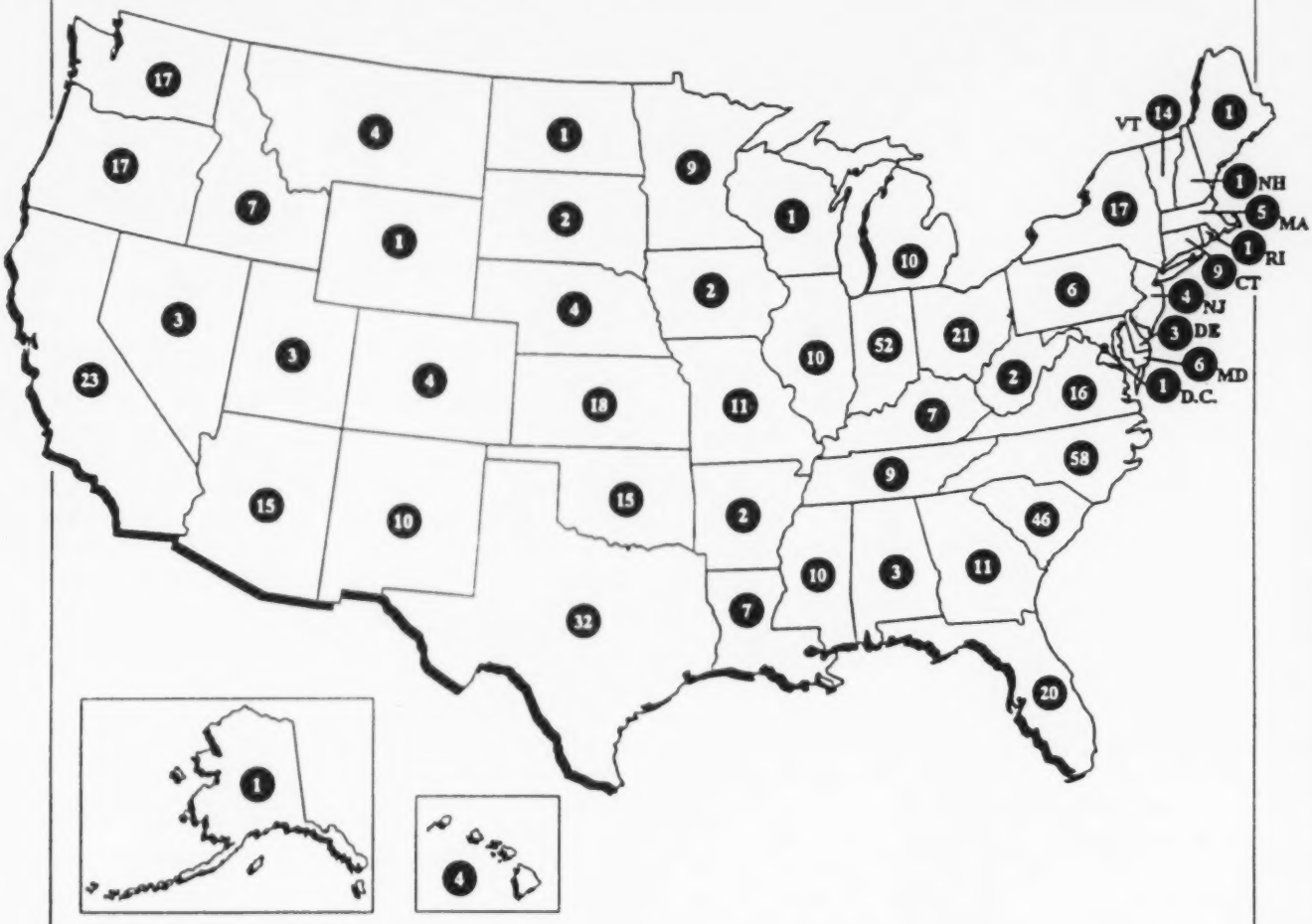
-- Judge Edith Miller, New York, New York

Attorneys & social workers voice support:

"We have advocated for these programs."

-- Howard Davidson, Director
American Bar Association Center
on Children and the Law, Washington, D.C.

A LOOK AT CASA ACROSS THE COUNTRY



There are 556 CASA programs in 50 states.

Approximately 33,000 men and women are CASA volunteers.

Last year, these volunteers spoke for an estimated 116,000 abused and neglected children in court.

New CASA programs start at the average of two per month.

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